



## **William Hojnacki and Richard Bonewitz**

Oral History Transcription

November 6, 2007 [Side B]

Interviewed by:	Les Lamon and Derek Webb
Place of interview:	Indiana University South Bend
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Approximate length of interview:	23 minutes
Transcribed by:	Zoë Morgan, Student Worker, Civil Rights Heritage Center
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Summary:	<p>Richard Bonewitz was a lawyer appointed to the Human Relations Commission in South Bend. He spoke of his role during the Civil Rights Movement, as well as depositions and investigations he gathered that involved race related cases.</p> <p>William Hojnacki was a social studies teacher and football coach at Central High School for a few years before working on the Human Rights Commission where he filed complaints of discrimination under city ordinances. He spoke of the racism and discrimination he witnessed in schools, and the role he played to combat that.</p>

0:00:02 [Les Lamon] Again, coming back to something Gerald Hart says in there, and I'd be interested in your response to it. In this case, particularly Dick. He's talking about the Commission wanting, and with the Lloyd Allen Administration, wanting to talk only with the conservative blacks, we would call them "Uncle Toms". I don't think he comes right out and calls them "Uncle Toms", but only to talk with them. I think it was Dr. Streets that was on the Commission at the time, and even saying that he didn't adequately, was adequately sensitive to the needs of the people that, whose lives were most at stake here. Did you feel that George Neagu was making an effort to expand the range of blacks that were brought into the system that would come to you with complaints? That would see the system as being responsive to Civil Rights?

[Richard Bonewitz] Well, I don't know that I worked with George long enough to have any great sense of things of that kind. I knew that he was a strong advocate for the black community. He certainly was that. That I accepted as very positive. Even then, you can be an advocate, but you don't have to pull the hatchet out and make enemies.

[William Hojnacki] Right, exactly.

[RB] George had a way of making enemies. There's no question about that. He made a lot of them. He certainly couldn't sit down with a group of people and reason with them. In a forceful manner, he had to command and insult and tell them what to do.

0:02:07 [LL] Well, we interviewed him back in 2002, early on. He didn't know anything about this or anything, at the time we didn't have that, but he made a comment here that what he thought was his role at the Commission. What I'm hearing, how Bill described Winston Vaz is what he did. That really is in great contrast as to what George thought as his role.

[WH] One of the reasons they hired Winston Vaz is because he wasn't George Neagu.

[LL] Yeah, but what I'm wondering is, which two of these views of the Commission maybe best describes the work of the Commission?

[RB] Well, I would say the Commission was generally very pleased with Winston Vaz.

0:02:50 [LL] Okay, well let me read what George said. He's saying that, "I was going to the barber shops, and the pool rooms, and putting up Human Relations posters letting them know there was something new in town. You know, and you should see some of the looks I got like, 'Who was this?', 'What's he up to?' That kind of thing. So, it was a big question of any kind of relationship, you have to establish trust first, and then it comes

from that..." Well, anyway, you saw the problem with trust. It seems kind of consistent, he's saying that, "I'm going to go out in the places that white folks don't go and let them know that there's a Commission here that they can come to if they feel like their rights, whether it's housing or whatever it might be. And that you don't have to", as Hart would say, "you don't have to hear it from Dr. Streets, or Dr. Chamblee, or some of the upper-class blacks..."

[WH] Jessie Dickinson.

[LL] Jessie Dickinson.

[WH] Chester Allen

[LL] Yeah, "You can go now to me, to the Commission, and be heard".

[RB] We don't have any problem with that.

[LL] Do you think that maybe he saw himself, whereas, what I heard you say about Winston Vaz is, he was more of investigate something that comes to, rather than going out and trying to change the dynamic?

[WH] Right. That was my job.

0:04:18 [LL] And maybe Hart thought it was his job too. Just to pass onto you, we interviewed a guy here, maybe Bill knows him. He used to live here, grew up here, his name was Andre Buchanan. Lives in New Haven, Connecticut, but was back here visiting and we interviewed him. He talked about when he first came back from the military and was looking for a place to live, and he went to a place, I believe it was on Washington or Colfax, and all of those apartment buildings there. And they told him they didn't have anything, but he said he knew that they did. He went right down the street wherever the offices were and reported it. Whoever it was at the time, probably Neagu, or Hart, or maybe you, someone went out and confronted them about that. They called him two days later and he had a place there. So, people, his case was, "I was a nobody", but he knew where to get his grievances fixed. It sounds to me like, in a way what George Neagu was saying, the word did get out.

0:05:16 [WH] Well, Les, it seems to me, that when you look at that Commission, the only thing in city government that was committed to this, a very small population, was under budget. But really, the statutes that created it were primarily to process and hold public hearings on cases of discrimination. So, we had all kinds of cases that would come in, housing, employment discrimination, primarily. I remember going out to Sibley Tool and Dye and going out and interviewing these people, and one person that had a complaint filed against him was Tom Brademas. I remember him coming

in and pleading his case. Then we could, I don't remember were now what the sanctions were found, that they were discriminating against. Do you remember?

[LL] Did you even have any sanctions?

0:06:02 [WH] I don't know what we could do, but I remember I had a whole file cabinet full of files of different cases. But, that's see, that was at one level. The next level was, did we have a responsibility to somehow try and improve race relations and try to somehow make life easier for black folks who were having a difficult time because of racism? Then it gets a little murkier about what our charge was. Did we really have the responsibility? We certainly didn't have the budget for that kind of thing. We had no staff; we had no program staff. But, when we talked of what it was, at least to a degree, not as much as George Neagu. George Neagy thought that he was sort of the Messiah for solving all the city's racial problems at the time. Remember, at the same time, you also had State Civil Rights Commission, and you had the Federal Civil Rights Commission. All of which were sort of intertwined [inaudible].

[LL] I think at some point in there, the head of the state one was also from here, Lee Crane.

[WH] Could be. I don't remember that.

[LL] Do you remember...

[WH] I think our biggest weapon was half of us. [inaudible] They would, if they could, they would comply.

0:07:16 [LL] I'm just trying to get a feel for Neagu as an operator here. I don't know about Derek, but I'm starting to get a feel for that. It sounds like, in a way, that he took upon himself a bigger role than technically the ordinance provided.

[WH] Well that, and he was in politics [inaudible].

[LL] That's right.

[RB] Time's were a lot different then than they are today. In a matter of race anymore. The n-word is out now. The n-word used to be the word of the day among all kinds of people.

[LL] What's amazing, and in retrospect, I'd forgotten this because I was one of those that interviewed him; he had good things to say about Lloyd Allen, even though Allen was the man who—

[RB] Uh, Neagu?

[LL] Yeah, Neagu did. I was surprised at that actually.

0:08:14 [RB] Well, why Lloyd wanted... he certainly wanted to make headway and wanted good things to happen. No question about that. I think he was very sincere in that. In fact, he was sincere in a lot of things he did. He was a hell of a good mayor.

[WH] He was good. I have a lot of respect for him. Like I said, he hired me directly. I remember interviewing with him. He never asked— this was in 1968, I had just run for the State Legislature, I mean for the City Council the year before that, in 1967, as a Democrat. That didn't bother him a bit. He was pretty progressive for a Republican.

[RB] Oh, yeah.

[WH] He was no George Wallace or Richard Nixon; big booming voice. He lived over here [inaudible], when we were on East Jefferson. Boy, did he drink.

[overlapping conversation]

[RB] You know, I always have to correct everybody on that when they say he drank. He couldn't hold his liquor. It didn't take much. This is another story off the tape cause this is Lloyd Allen's—

[LL] I think we just—

[RB] We've had a lot of fun along with all this, I guess.

0:09:35 [LL] Yeah. Well, let me just ask you one, this is beside and comes out of nowhere, but probably a couple references to it. Do either of you remember the Blackstone Rangers out in Chicago coming out and doing a retreat at Notre Dame?

[WH] No.

[RB] No.

[LL] Well, Neagu says he arranged that because he worked with the gangs in Chicago before he came here, and that Father Hesburgh had allowed them to come there. I don't know exactly what supposedly went on there, but there's a couple references to that. Another one, do you remember a flap on the Human Relations Commission, over... Do you remember Vera Brechtal who was the secretary? I guess she was secretary before Odessa Earls.

[WH] She resigned at the same time.

[LL] Yeah, same time.

[overlapping conversation]

0:10:26 [LL] Well, she apparently sent out invitations to a fundraiser for Richard Hatcher and used stationary from the Human Rights Commission. That embarrassed Neagu and got him into some [inaudible]. Do you remember that episode?

[RB] Could have— I don't remember. It could have been before me.

[LL] That would've been in '68 wasn't it?

[WH] No, Hatcher was elected in '67, for the first time.

[LL] Alright. It was at that point. Cause Hatcher was a friend of Neagu's. He had worked, first of all, here. Well I didn't know about either of those too.

[RB] I don't have any recollection.

0:11:01 [LL] Just throw out one more name, and that is Lawrence Crockett, Reverend Lawrence Crockett. He was a Pilgrim Baptist. He was the head of the NAACP. You ever heard of him?

[WH] Barely remember him, but I do.

[RB] I know the name. That's about it.

[LL] Lesson after this episode.

[overlapping conversation]

[WH] Before we conclude, I have one more observation, and it really is just an observation. I learned more about this later when I was with Brademas than I did back then. Brademas was '70 to '74. The black community was not unified—

[RB] You're talking about the Congressman?

[LL] Yeah, John Brademas.

0:11:40 [WH] Yeah. The black community was not always unified. There was major split between the sort of professionals, which were the Chamblees, and the Allens, and the Dickinsons, and the Curtises, and sort of the ghetto folks. The middle-class group, particularly the teachers, they were some police officers that fall in that category. It wasn't a huge group, but they were far more conservative, far more willing to work "through the system", through the Human Rights Commission, through the NAACP, legal defense fund. You know, to try to get equality, which was their goal was.

0:12:21 The other group, which was much larger, much less educated, from which the various troublemakers would normally come, that's the group Neagu represents. This was early on, of course this is '67-'68. But this was when the Black Power syndicate sort of overtook the country after Martin Luther King was killed. So, there was sort of a collision there between those two cultures. One, who said, "Let the [inaudible] be damned. We're going to grab what we need, what we want now. We're not being taught at school, and we're going to fire the teachers", and all that sort of thing. And then the other group, that was much more systematic where— I think the Commission was largely made up of that group. My observation of the Commission was that they were a pretty liberal group, but certainly not radical.

[LL] They were established members?

[WH] Oh, yeah. They would view— Well, Kosinski was on there.

[RB] He was a long way from being liberal.

0:13:22 [WH] Well, he was sort of interesting. He pulled me aside one time, you'll appreciate this little story, one moment he asked what I was doing. I said, "Well, I'm going to graduate school at Notre Dame. I'm getting my Doctorate in Government". He said, "Oh, you don't want to do that". He said, "Which one of you is the [inaudible]? I tell you, you get a lot of [inaudible] money, and I'll guarantee you \$25,000 a year". That was quite a bit of money. I talked about that, and then of course, Jim Silver [inaudible].

[RB] [inaudible] Streets, of course.

[WH] [inaudible] Streets. Mrs. Kurtz, was that her name?

[overlapping conversation]

[LL] What about Mrs. Butts?

[overlapping conversation]

[RB] He was.

[LL] He was? Okay.

[RB] Yeah, I'm pretty sure he was. What was the racial makeup of the council?

0:14:12 [DW] What was the racial makeup of the Council?

[LL] The Commission?

[RB] Of the Commission, excuse me.

[WH] As far as I know, there might have been one woman, and one black person there [inaudible].

[RB] But, predominantly white, that's for sure.

[LL] Derek, you have anything else you want to add before?

0:14:35 [Derek Webb] The only other things, and it might be getting into kind of a subject, I always like to ask about, kind of, the housing situation and what, maybe, the Commission's perspective was on that. I guess the second question that would be then, how did Mayor Allen try to ultimately, based on maybe the Commission's recommendations, deal with housing in South Bend?

[WH] I don't know that the Commission ever made any recommendations. We tried to be able to deal with individual cases of discrimination. I remember there was some talk about trying to eliminate the use of for sale signs because that would invoke panic in neighborhoods if there were too many houses for sale at one time. But I don't remember seriously being into that issue at all. I was there, I had did it. Later in life, it was a different thing, same time.

[DW] Were there a lot of complaints to the Commission from residents regarding housing and discrimination?

0:15:31 [RB] Oh, I think discrimination and housing in those years was all over. There was a lot of it, and it was hard to do anything about it. It was a gradual process until people started getting some teeth to do some things. I think, now, I think it's largely gone. You see blacks, they got the money, they can move. I haven't heard recently anybody talking about that they wouldn't sell to a black person.

[LL] I think there are still some problems in rental property.

[overlapping conversation]

[RB] Oh, I'm sure there's some there, but it's not like it used to was.

0:16:18 [WH] Well, the financial institutions sort of, somebody has to say it, I don't care if it's us, you know, the red lining. If you wanted to get a mortgage in this particular place, you couldn't do it, but you could get it over here, you know.

[LL] Alright. Do you have any idea where that is? We've heard about that study, but nobody can find it. Somebody thought that there was even down at the Center for History, there was a map that even had the lines, the areas of red lining.

[WH] Again, you know, I can't help you. I'm sorry.



[LL] Yeah, that wasn't done. You don't think that was done by that [inaudible]?

0:16:52 [RB] The things I remember that we did, at that time, in those years, if a black person died, their treatment in the paper wasn't like white people. I remember Leo and I, Leo Newman and I, went over and sat down with Jack Powers one time. We went over that.

[LL] Over the History Martini Lunch?

[RB] I saw him at Martini Lunch's, but that was usually after five o'clock when I was having mine. He could drink his martinis. But anyway, that was, I would say, very shortly after that conversation that changed.

[LL] And that was initially that you took in your official capacity?

[overlapping conversation]

0:17:45 [RB] Oh, absolutely. And they changed a number of things, and they responded, and Jack would respond. Jack was, I didn't appreciate it at the time, but he was a liberal.

[WH] Oh, he was. Yeah, he came from New York City.

[LL] You're talking about Jack Powers?

[WH] Jack Powers. Not McGann

[overlapping conversation]

[LL] Not [inaudible], who was also from New York and also very liberal. Alright. Well listen, we thank you all very much. I know it's getting close to your five o'clock. [inaudible] probably got your glass of wine waiting.

[RB] No martinis anymore.

0:18:23 [LL] It is election day, so we have to find out who's winning the election.

[WH] Absolutely. I predict Leucke'll win by a thousand votes.

[LL] It'll be that close? Really?

[RB] You think a thousand votes is going to be the margin? That'll be close then.

[WH] Yeah, it will be. I ran into Lynn Coleman at the cleaners on the way over here. I talked to him, he said, "Hey, everything's going to be okay". I said, "Lynn, how do you know?" I said, "A thousand votes". He said, "Two thousand". I said, "Lynn, I am never wrong".

[RB] I hope you're right.

[LL] Okay, well listen, thank you. We do need to get these forms back here—

0:19:04 [Audio ends]